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Crisis of Evangelical Christianity: Roots, Consequences, and Resolutions (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity: Roots, Consequences, and Resolutions. Sewell, Keith C. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016. 292pp. ISBN: 978-1498238755. Reviewed by K. Scott Culpepper, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

The quest to define the elusive concept of “evangelicalism” has claimed a flood of ink and reams upon reams of paper, not to mention all the digital incarnations of those debates. The election of 2016 smashed into all previous understandings of “evangelicals” and “evangelicalism” with all the gentle force of a hydrogen bomb. Pundits, prognosticators, and professors alike returned to the drawing board, while prominent religious leaders questioned once again the utility of the term “evangelical.” Keith C. Sewell’s *The Crisis of Evangelicalism: Roots, Consequences, and Resolutions* arrives, then, at a timely moment. Sewell, Professor of History Emeritus at Dordt College, has forged a distinguished career, teaching and writing about evangelicalism in its many historical contexts. Sewell shares the fruit of those labors now as both a guide to scholars and a jeremiad that calls evangelicals to resolve the crisis that he sees at the roots of evangelical theology and praxis.

Two important elements set Sewell’s work apart from other treatments of evangelical history and theology. First, Sewell assumes an unabashedly Reformed perspective rooted in the Kuyperian tradition. While elements of Kuyperian thought have been critical to the development of the evangelical Christian scholarship championed by scholars such as the philosopher Arthur Holmes and the historian Mark Noll, Sewell correctly notes that much of this scholarship has omitted or diluted the creational theology so central to Dutch Reformed thought. Even evangelical scholars who have been conscious of their indebtedness to the Kuyperian tradition tend to yield to the evangelical insistence on prioritizing evangelism and shallow activism over a more fulsome understanding of the creational mandate. Sewell seeks to correct this imbalance in the evangelical traditions by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the movement through an undiluted

Kuyperian lens. Secondly, Sewell looks at the evangelical tradition in its larger international context, as shaped by his varied experiences in Europe, North America, and Australasia. This broader perspective yields a more comprehensive canvas for comparison and contrast than most works on evangelicalism.

Sewell does not mince words in his critique of evangelicalism. He contends that this movement, which elevates the importance of Scripture to such an extent, is not so scriptural when evaluated in light of its claims regarding creation and culture. Sewell writes, “In Evangelicalism, the dominant tendency has been to emphasize the repentant individual before the cross in a way that neglects what the Scriptures have to say about the order of creation and the kingdom of God” (6). The consequence of this neglect is no less a reduction of the gospel message itself: “This ‘creational deficit’ across Evangelicalism has meant that even Evangelicalism’s evangelism has characteristically fallen short of the Biblical norm—the gospel has not been brought to every creature and to every part of life as the Bible teaches, but for the most part only to individual souls” (7). This creational aspect of the crisis leads, in Sewell’s estimation, to a corresponding cultural deficiency as well. Sewell continues, “At best, Evangelicalism has exhibited only a sporadic and fluctuating awareness of the religious significance of human culture and of the truth that *all of life is religion* [Sewell’s emphasis]—in the sense of lived *coram Deo*; before the face of God” (7).

Sewell locates the beginnings of continuing tensions within evangelicalism to unresolved issues stemming from the period of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. He identifies a tendency to create theological dichotomies as a persistent problem, leading to an avoidance of resolving issues or acknowledging that some issues defy earthly resolution. One of these unresolved

tensions remains the question of exactly how the Bible is to be understood as an inspired text; another is the relation of Biblical revelation to the created order. Sewell provides a fascinating discussion of the relationship of the written revelation to the methodologies adopted by theologians of the early modern period for understanding the nature of the creational order: “The Bible certainly does not tell us about all things. It does tell us what all things are all about” (41). He critiques the tendency of evangelicals to make the Bible a textbook for science rather than the fundamental guide for understanding how to approach science as well as other fields of study: “Moreover, while the Bible is not a book *of* science—it is a book *for* science, and it is not just a book for one science; rather it is *a book for all sciences*” (41, emphasis Sewell’s).

Sewell reconstructs the historical development of evangelicalism in the middle section of his book and uses this narrative to highlight the consequences of those unresolved issues at the roots of evangelicalism. This reconstruction includes observations on how the unresolved questions inherited from the Reformation period continued through the influence of continental pietism through the Moravians, the revivalism of the awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the cultural tensions between modernist views and evangelism in the early 20th century. Sewell notes how an evangelical social activism gave way towards the end of the 19th century to an “otherworldliness” exemplified by the rise of Holiness and Pentecostal traditions. The focus on individual conversion over corporate spiritual formation that appeared in the 18th century accelerates in Sewell’s perspective to an unhealthy individualism by the end of the 19th century. Sewell writes, “Even as evangelical views of holiness became increasingly otherworldly and drew upon an already deeply entrenched individualism, the growing influence of premillennial dispensationalist views reinforced and validated that already strong evangelical disposition towards social and political conservatism” (120). Sewell continues his trek through the history of evangelism with a penetrating analysis of 20th-century developments and their continuing trend towards evangelical syncretism with mainstream cultures: “Syncretism abounds among evangelicals. Rather than be salt and light for the world,

Evangelicalism functions as its own biggest distraction” (182).

Sewell fulfills the promise of his subtitle—“Roots, Consequences, and Resolutions”—by proposing several ideas for a resolution of the evangelical crisis. These potential resolutions all involve returning to reformational first principles in several key areas, including biblical interpretation, participation in public life, education, and spiritual formation in individual congregations. The bedrock of these reformational first principles is a “directional” perspective on Scripture. Sewell sees this directional perspective as present in many facets of John Calvin’s approach to Scripture in the 16th century and in the reformational tradition of Abraham Kuyper in the 19th, as well as Hermann Dooyeweerd in the 20th. This approach to scriptural interpretation views Scripture as providing principles to guide thinking and action, but not serving as a substitute for further reflection and research to understand creation. Sewell concludes, “Once Christians get past the proof-texting tendencies of the Bible-based model and understand that the whole Word (*Tota Scriptura*) applies to the whole of life, and that biblically revealed first principles are *directive*, for every part of human life and field of human endeavor, they are then in a position to speak integrally to the twenty-first century” (208). While Sewell’s proposed resolutions would benefit from a few more specific examples of how these first principles can be applied in concrete situations, the overall portrait he paints is a compelling answer to the crisis he discusses throughout the book.

The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity contains a timely call for reform and renewal that needs to be heard. It is sad that those who most need to engage with Sewell’s work are those least likely to read it. Part of that may be due to the direct way that Sewell addresses evangelical weakness. His tone in some places is certainly a hard pill to swallow for sensitive evangelicals and their leaders. On the other hand, many who have lamented the continued proliferation of the evangelical contradictions Sewell identifies can understand the need to be forceful and direct in light of evangelical tendencies to not just ignore these kind of valid critiques, but to double down on the actions and attitudes critiqued. Sewell provides a beneficial analysis and suggestions for

renewal that would greatly enrich evangelical communities if they have ears to hear.

Sewell's work is also timely because of the great need for people in the Christian Reformed tradition to recover what is best about their own Kuyperian roots. It is distressing to see how many elements of evangelical syncretism are being incorporated into institutional bodies that were built on the very Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical foundations that Sewell argues are paths for renewal. How can the Christian Reformed tradition provide light to aid evangelicals with these issues when many of our own are abandoning first principles for a "grass is greener" incorporation of evangelical syncretism? Sewell's book serves as a jeremiad, calling not only evangelicals but also the heirs of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd to reject gospel reductionism in favor of the fulsome gospel revealed in reformation-

al approaches to biblical interpretation and cultural engagement.

Keith Sewell's *The Crisis of Evangelical Christianity* deserves the highest commendation and recommendation. It is thoroughly researched, well written, and cogently argued. Sewell demonstrates well his skills as a historian in his reconstruction and interpretation of the general historical currents of evangelicalism. Sewell also impresses the reader with his ability as a theologian and exegete of Scripture. His practical recommendations for a way forward reveal the concern and passion of a Christian scholar who has his ear to the ground. The book benefits from his years of practical experience as a churchman invested in fostering renewal in both the church and academy. It prompts conversations about important issues that need to continue and issues calls for action that should not be delayed.

A Little Book for New Scientists. Reeves, Josh A., and Steve Donaldson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016. 142pp. ISBN: 978-0-8308-5144-7. Reviewed by Carl P. Fictorie, Professor of Chemistry, Dordt College.

As a chemistry professor in a Christian college, I am always interested in books that can help my students build connections between their Christian faith and their science knowledge. Thus, when *A Little Book for New Scientists* became available, it immediately demanded my attention. Its conversational style, short chapters, comprehensive scope, and extensive references will meet the new scientists where they are. At the same time, however, these features make for a text that lacks the depth and detail needed to provide a solid foundation upon which to build.

The purpose of the book is "to help Christians studying and practicing in the sciences to connect their vocation with their Christian faith" (13). Over nine chapters in three sections, Reeves and Donaldson encourage Christians in the sciences by making a case that it is certainly possible, and actually necessary, for scientists to live out their faith in their scientific activity.

As the title suggests, this is a short book of 142 pages, written in a conversational style, giving the feeling that the authors are serving as mentors to scientists early in their career. While this is not an

academic treatise, the authors include a large number of references and sources. Thus, the young scientist can use this book as the starting point for a deeper journey into understanding the relationship between Christianity and science.

The book is divided into three sections: "Why study science?" "Characteristics of Faithful Scientists," and "Science and Christian Faith." The young scientist does need to start with the introduction. The introduction, building a bridge of solidarity with the reader, opens with a sympathetic discussion of the many pressures on the scientist in a highly competitive and very critical profession. Additional pressure comes from the tension between Christian faith and scientific practice. The authors provide comfort by assuring the reader that Christian truths have little to fear from attacks by science, and that the scientist who engages in this discussion is "growing toward a fuller understanding of [God] (and his creation)" (15).

In the opening section, "Why Study Science," Reeves and Donaldson address three major themes: the "two books" metaphor as a helpful motif for relating scripture and nature, the triumphalist history